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**Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places:
Country Music and the Politics of Identity***

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Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places:

Country Music and the Politics of Identity

Some might believe that the politics of country music is an oxymoron. One can listen to top 40 country all one's life and never hear a sophisticated political statement. But one should not expect to hear the musical version of Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* from a musical genre that has its roots in the marginalized life-style of the American South and West. Expecting political sophistication from bards who marry 13 year old cousins and then wonder why no one buys their records is a fairly high standard.¹ At the same time, the politics and political thinking in country music might not be that different from the average American. Robert Lane's (1962) in depth assessment on the political ideology of Americans found that they rarely think about politics; and when they do, it is fairly superficially. The basic concerns of country music are the concerns of everyday life among those who listen to country music, perhaps best expressed by David Allen Coe² (1975) in the final verse of what he refers to as the perfect country song "You Never Even Call Me by My Name":

Well, I was drunk the day my Mom got outta prison.
And I went to pick her up in the rain.
But, before I could get to the station in my pickup truck
She got runned over by a damned old train.

The basic content of country music covers drinking, prison, trucks, momma, trains, plus of course lying and cheating; politics is rarely the central concern.

¹The story of Maya and Jerry Lee Lewis is well documented, see Guralnick (2015).

²This essay will refer to the artist rather than the writer in reference to songs. Although the words of a song are the work of the writer, artists have choices in what songs they record, the general public will associate the song with the artist, and readers of this article will be more familiar with the artist than the writer.

In a broader sense, however, all art and music is political even if it seeks to avoid politics. A reasonable analogy to the political context of country music is French impressionist art (see House 2004). Impressionism was clearly anti-establishment and presented in opposition to state-sanctioned art and its venue, the salon. Impressionism rejected the idea of art in service to the state. It challenged realism and idealism (the idea that art is to inspire) with its focus on scenes from everyday life. Country music is clearly about scenes from the ordinary everyday life of the common man (see Malone 1965: 359; or musically Conlee 1981). It reflects its populist roots in the South and West; it combines economic liberalism, even radicalism at times, and social conservatism with an under current of race and class.

According to Messner et al. (2007: 1740) “music is a universal medium for conveying messages and meaning to listeners.” In this regard the politics of country music can be considered a form of symbolic politics (Gusfield 1986) seeking to define what is “America” and what it means to be a true American. It is an effort to proclaim and endorse a set of values that are reflected in country music. As such it should be considered a form of redistributive politics – the effort to establish that these values are the important American values; other values should be considered deviant and subject to scorn. Country music is, thus, part of the politics of identity in the United States; it seeks to make the statement that “we are the true Americans.”³

This essay will develop six themes from country music that reveal its politics.⁴ First,

³And by contrast if you do not accept these values, you are not a “true American.” As William Jennings Bryan (Bromley 2003) stated in another context, “we stand at Armageddon, and we fight for the Lord.” This can be viewed as another aspect of what I call “the politics of sin” in contemporary America (Meier 1994).

⁴I identify with the feminist position that everything is political.

country music accepts the purity and genuine goodness of the “little man” and the evils of bigness whether big government or big business. The focus of this theme is on social class and, as such, challenges southern populism and traditional antebellum southern governance that stressed race to extent of suppressing class as an identity (see Malone 2002).⁵ Second, country music is about traditional family values, at least as applied to women. This emphasis has generated a distinctive country feminism genre as a counter point. Third, country music idolizes patriotism. The way to get people to overlook other issues that divide is by appealing to them to be true patriotic Americans. Fourth, with few exceptions, country music is a white genre. While race is rarely explicitly mentioned,⁶ the performers and audience are virtually all white.⁷ Fifth, country music is nostalgic; as it pines for the good old days when country values were held in high regard. Sixth, country music has strong religious overtones (see Malone 2002: chapter 4); God wants you to sing through your nose. The religious emphasis at times creates its own dialectic in country music when artists challenge contemporary religion or contemporary politics by linking their own challenges to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

⁵Malone (2002: ix) notes that the class struggle in country music rarely engages political action but rather “their proposed resolutions often take the form of fantasy – nostalgia, machismo, escapism, religion, and romantic love.”

⁶There are clear exceptions. The racism of David Allen Coe (1978; 1982) in his underground albums and even in his frequently played “If That Ain’t Country” is readily apparent. Marty Robbins diatribe against the civil rights freedom riders will be covered later in this essay.

⁷Music executives, for example, did not reveal that Charlie Pride was African American until after he had several top 10 hits. In more contemporary times, Darius Rucker (2008) “Don’t Think I Don’t Think About It” became the first African-American to have a number 1 country single since Charlie Pride in 1983. Rucker, former lead singer of Hootie and the Blowfish, has had several subsequent hit records. See also Hootie and the Blowfish (1994) “Drowning” in regard to the Confederate flag.

Before investigating the political themes of country music, asking what constitutes country music is a reasonable starting question. Individual identities in politics such as race, gender, partisanship vary both by time and location, and are often shaped by political events (Gilliam 1996). Music genres, particularly country music, similarly evolve over time and place. In the 1950s the distinction between rock and country was blurred with advent of artists like Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and others. The same contention applies to place as illustrated by the introduction of drums into what becomes western swing by Bob Wills or the Austin/outlaw reaction to the Nashville sound of the 1970s. The essay takes a broad approach and accepts as country music any music that individuals identified as country music at the time of its origin or later adopted as such.⁸

American Values in Country Music

Perhaps the best example of this evolution in genres might be Woody Guthrie, clearly a folk artist during his lifetime but readily accepted as country today, perhaps as the result of Willie Nelson. Renditions of Guthrie's (1940) classic "This Land is Your Land" generally only cover the first few verses and what appears to be a glowing endorsement of America:⁹

This land is your land. This land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

But subsequent verses contrast this idealism with the harsh reality of the common (read little)

⁸While I accept this catholic approach intellectually, my own listening habits refuse to accept it. My preference currently is outlaw country, and I am known to rail at my satellite radio when Sirius XM Radio 60 plays Glen Campbell or Dolly Parton.

⁹Nelson's recording of "This Land is Your Land" at FarmAid 1992 does not include the sixth verse.

man and the challenges of unemployment, hunger and lack of prospects, so in verse 6:

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?

The contrast between the positive sweeping images of America in verse one and the bleakness of the reality in the latter verse is striking. Clearly the American dream is not available to everyone.

Patriotism

Social criticism in country music generally does not come from the left as with Woody Guthrie but more often comes from the right and is frequently mixed with patriotism. The music seeks to define American values and point out deviations from orthodoxy. The evolution of the political thinking of Merle Haggard provides both an excellent set of examples and illustrates how criticism of government can often bridge the political spectrum. Haggard responded to what he perceived as the challenge to American patriotism by anti-war protesters during the Vietnam war in 1970 with his “Fightin’ Side of Me”:

I hear people talkin’ bad,
About the way we have to live here in this country,
Harpin’ on the wars we fight,
An’ gripin’ ‘bout the way things oughta be.
An’ I don’t mind ‘em switchin’ sides,
An’ standin’ up for things they believe in.
When they’re runnin’ down my country, man,
They’re walkin’ on the fightin’ side of me.

Which then leads into the more direct and confrontational chorus:

If you don’t love it, leave it:
Let this song I’m singin’ be a warnin’.
If you’re runnin’ down my country, man,

You're walkin' on the fightin' side of me.¹⁰

American values, it appears, are not up for discussion: my country, right or wrong is the appropriate American value. Beyond the political position on the Vietnam War, Haggard (1969a) adds to his statement about American values in "Okie from Muskogee":

We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee
We don't take no trips on LSD¹¹
We don't burn no draft cards down on Main Street
We like livin' right, and bein' free.

I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee
A place where even squares can have a ball
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse
And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all.

Haggard provides a clear statement about what it is to be an American and goes to the extreme of even designating acceptable vices (moonshine) versus unacceptable ones (marijuana). So this is not about obeying laws. After all white lighting or other forms of moonshine are violations of federal tax law, and while not as severely punished as marijuana at the time, are still illegal. As long as one is patriotic (note the tie back to the flag), a little illegal behavior is perfectly acceptable.

Political values, however, are clearly influenced by policy actions as the political science literature on policy feedback demonstrates (Mettler, 2002; Soss and Schram 2007). The post-Vietnam conservative political triumphs do not appear to have reinforced Haggard's view of American values. Just twelve years after "Okie from Muskogee" Haggard (1981a) released "Rainbow Stew" where his patriotic fervor and conservative image of America evolves into

¹⁰See Ernest Tubb (1965) "It's America (Love or Leave It)

¹¹We also don't learn us no grammar.

cynicism and hints of betrayal:

There's a big brown cloud in the city
And the countryside's a sin
And the price of life is too high to give up
Gotta come down again
When the world wide war is over and done
And the dream of peace comes true
We'll all be drinking that free bubble up
And eating that rainbow stew.

Where might the blame for the denigration of American values be placed; Haggard leaves little doubt in the rest of the song:

When a president goes through the white house doors
An' does what he says he'll do
We'll all be drinking that free bubble up
And eating that rainbow stew.

Politicians, even conservative ones in Haggard's view, are part of the problem. Politicians will say anything to get elected and then ignore their electoral promises. The cynicism about America continues in "Are the Good Times Really Over" (Haggard 1981b) which is then linked into the country music value of nostalgia:

I wish a buck was still silver
It was back when the country was strong
Back before Elvis
Before the Vietnam war came along

Are we rolling down hill
Like a snowball headed for hell?
With no kind of chance
For the Flag or the Liberty Bell.

It is unlikely that Haggard is advocating for a policy of hard currency or even a return to William Jennings Bryan's call for free and unlimited coinage of silver (at the time an argument for inflation, see Calomiris 1992). Rather his concern is again the decline in patriotism and the

eroding of American values. To make it very clear where some of the blame for this lies, he ties it directly to political leadership:

I wish Coke was still cola
And a joint was a bad place to be
It was back before Nixon lied to us all on TV.¹²

To foreshadow our later discussion of family values and feminism in country music, the next few lines Haggard makes it clear that he wraps the feminist movement up with all the other problems with contemporary society (see the discussion below on feminism in country music):

Before microwave ovens
When a girl could still cook and still would
Is the best of the free life behind us now
Are the good times really over for good?

The disillusionment with the American dream and its deviation from the good old days spread even further in country music. Hank Williams, Jr., known more for the drinking and cheating themes in country music (see “All My Rowdy Friends” 1981; “Whiskey Bent and Hell Bound” 1979) and his paean to football (“Are You Ready for Some Football” 1989) sings a litany of his concerns with contemporary America (Williams 1982a):¹³

Too many lawyers in football, baseball’s gotta few
The pitcher got a million dollars and the quarterback he got two

¹²The reference to Nixon concerns his statement about any involvement in illegal activities in regard to the break in and attempted bugging of Democratic Party offices during the 1972 election campaign. On national television Nixon stated “People have gotta know whether their president is a crook, well I am not a crook.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sh163n11J4M>, accessed April 21, 2016.

¹³Williams has been heavily involved in Republican party politics. He reworked his song “We Are Young Country” in 2000 to be “This is Bush-Cheney Country” and his comment that a golf game between President Barak Obama and Speaker of the House John Boehner was like “Hitler planing golf with Netanyahu” led to ESPN dropping his “Are You Ready for Some Football” as the theme song to Monday Night Football.

Pitcher threw his arm away and the quarterback burned his knee
And this they did so they could live the American dream.

The degeneration of American sports and the bad influence of money is similarly reflected in

American religious life:

Now there are some preachers on T.V. with a suit and a tie and a vest
They want you to send your money to the Lord but they give you
Their address 'cause all of your donations are completely tax free
God bless you all, but most of all, send your money.

Politicians are not spared the Williams' barbs as he further sings:

Reagan is a cuttin' the budget makin' the Democrats scream
Says, "We gotta control inflation, quit spendin' our money on everything"
But this year's tax increase, why? It's the biggest in history
Round and a round we go where we stop, who knows, the American dream

And then ending with: "Hail to the chief, hell, yeah."

Patriotism Redux: Country Music Comes Home from the War

Although the political orientation of country music is clearly conservative, it does have its populist roots and idolization of the little man that sometimes brings in more liberal views.

Perhaps the most liberal is Kris Kristofferson in terms of both anti-war songs and generally expressed concerns about the plight of the average American.¹⁴ In "Broken Freedom Song"

Kristofferson (1974) details the problems of the contemporary veteran:

Got a song about a soldier
Ridin' somewhere on a train
Empty sleeve pinned to his shoulder
And some pills to ease the pain

Started drinkin' in El Paso

¹⁴Kristofferson is an unusual country artist, a former Rhodes Scholar, whose initial contributions were as a song writer. He is probably the closest to an heir of Woody Guthrie in terms of protest songs.

He was drunk in Sa Antone
Tellin' strangers who were sleepin'
How he hated goin' home

Just a simple song of freedom
He was never fightin' for
No one's listenin' when you need 'em
Ain't no fun to sing that song no more.¹⁵

Kristofferson continues with one of his consistent themes tying his protests to Christian values; similar to Hark Williams, Jr., Kristofferson's Christianity eschews the mega-church trend and seeks the wisdom of Jesus of Nazareth rather than Joel Osteen. "Broken Freedom Song" continues with this link:

Got a song about a savior
Lookin' lonesome and afraid
At a city full of strangers
And a cross he never made

And he's sadder than he's wiser
And a longer way from home
And he wonders why his father
Left him bleeding and alone.

Kristofferson's concern with the plight of the soldier and the linkage to Christianity is also the subject of his 1971 release of "Good Christian Soldier":

'Cause it's hard to be a Christian soldier, when you tote a gun
And it hurts to have to watch a grown man cry
But we're playin' cards, writin' home, an' ain't we havin' fun
Turnin' on and learnin' how to die

Feminism and Country Music

¹⁵Contrast the tone of Kristofferson's concern for soldiers in "Broken Freedom Song" and "Good Christian Soldier" with Toby Keith's (2002) "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" where concern for the soldier transforms into an endorsement of aggressive foreign policy.

Country music is characterized by traditional family values where men are men who appear to spend most of their time drinking and catting around and women have babies, take care of the house, accept the double standard and in the words of Tammy Wynette “stand by your man.”¹⁶ Despite this historical sexist orientation (or not so historical if one listens to Bro Country), country music has always had strong women as either performers (e.g., Mother Maybelle Carter) or as the driving force behind male singers (e.g, Bonnie Owens and both Buck Owens and Merle Haggard). The origins of feminism in country music and the opposition to the double standard for men and women can be traced to Kitty Wells’ (1952) response to Hank Thompson’s (1952) “Wild Side of Life”:

As I sit here tonight, the jukebox playin’
The tune about the wild side of life
As I listen to the words you are sayin’
It brings memories when I was a trustin’ wife.

It wasn’t God who made honky tonk angels
As you said in the words of your song.
Too many times married men think they’re still single
That has caused many a good girl to go wrong.

Moving from the double standard to more assertive feminism, Loretta Lynn released several recordings that can be linked to gender equality issues (“Rated X” 1972; “One’s on the Way” 1971; “Don’t Come Home A-Drinkin’ (With Lovin’ on Your Mind)” 1966), but none was as direct a challenge to men having fun and women taking care of the children as “The Pill” (1975):

You wined me and dined me when I was you girl
Told me if I’d be your wife you’d show me the world
But all I’ve seen of this old world is a bed and a doctor bill

¹⁶“Stand by Your Man” (1969) was actually used as the theme song for George Wallace’s campaign for governor in 1963 with Tammy Wynette singing it at rallies (Raines 1982). The song has also been released by David Allen Coe, Lyle Lovett, and ironically the Dixie Chicks.

I'm tearin' down your brooder house because now I've got the pill
All these years I've stayed at home while you had all your fun
And every year that's gone by another baby's come
There's gonna be some changes made right here on nursery hill
You've set this chicken your last time 'cause now I've got the pill

From Loretta Lynn¹⁷ and the questions of equality in marriage, it is only a short step to generalizing to gender relationships in general as Laurie Morgan (1992) sings:

Sir, if you don't mind I'd rather be alone
From the moment I walked in tonight, you've been comin' on
If I've told you once, I've told you twice, I'm just here to unwind
I'm not interested in romance or what you have in mind
What part of no don't you understand?

Although Dolly Parton is generally not associated with feminist lyrics, she had a highly successful career as a businesswoman and kick started her solo career by splitting from Porter Wagoner as a duet partner (see also "Just Because I'm a Woman 1968).¹⁸ In the soundtrack for the Movie *9 to 5*, Parton (1980) sings about inequities in the workplace:

9 to 5, for service and devotion
You would think that I would deserve a fair promotion
Want to move ahead but the boss won't seem to let me
I swear sometimes that man is out to get me
They let you dream, just to watch 'em shatter
You're just a step on the boss man's ladder
But you got dreams he'll never take away.

The role of marriage and its impact on women and their life was addressed early by the Carter Family (1928) in "Single Girl, Married Girl" that contrasts the life of single girl who is

¹⁷Lynn's expectations for men in her songs are generally not high, see "Fist City" (1968): "I'm not a sayin' my baby is a saint, cause he ain't, and that he won't cat around with a kitty. I'm here to tell you gal to lay off of my man if you don't wanna go to Fist City."

¹⁸If one examines Parton's career, it is clear that people often confused her stage persona with her life as a business woman. Although her style of dress plays into stereotypes, her business and professional decisions are very consistent with feminist objectives.

dressed fine, goes shopping and does what she pleases and a married girl who wears whatever kind of clothes she can find, rocks the cradle, and cries. Traditional gender roles, while generally accepted in country music, have a group of dissenters. Kacey Musgraves, (2013) in “Follow Your Arrow” sings:

You’re damned if you do
And you’re damned if you don’t
So you might as well just do
Whatever you want
So
Make lots of noise
Kiss lots of boys
Or kiss lots of girls
If that’s something you’re into.¹⁹

In a similar vein, RaeLynn (2015) in Kissin’ Frogs endorses the freedom to make choices and make mistakes:

I want to make all my mistakes
While I’m young enough to make
Them once or twice
Or maybe three times . . .
Cause right now there ain’t nothing
Wrong with having fun and
Kissin’ frogs.

Perhaps the clearest resistance to tradition roles and targeted at the Bro country images of skimpily dressed women demurely riding in the shotgun seat of a pickup is Maddie & Tae’s (2015) equivalent of “It wasn’t God who make Honky Tonk Angels”:

Well, shakin’ my moneymaker ain’t ever made me a dime
And there ain’t no sugar for you in this shaker of mine

¹⁹Mainstream country music does not have many GLBTQ lyrics. It does have openly gay artists including Chely Wright, Ty Herndon, Billy Gilman, Shane McAnally, Brandy Clark, and k.d lang. “Follow Your Arrow” is significant in part because it was cowritten by Shane McAnally and Brandy Clark and is about Clark and her life.

Tell me one more time, "you gotta get you some of that"
Sure I'll slide on over, but you're gonna get slapped (Hah!)
These days it ain't easy being that
Girl in a country song.²⁰

Gender equity in female-male relationships took a more aggressive tone as issues such as domestic abuse become incorporated into the music. The classic work in this area is "Goodbye Earl" by the Dixie Chicks (1999), a song about a woman named Wanda being abused by her husband, Earl:

Well, it wasn't two weeks after she got married
That Wanda started gettin abused.
She put on dark glasses, long sleeve blouses
And make-up to cover a bruise.

Well, she finally got the nerve to file for divorce.
She let the law take it from there.
But Earl walked right through that restraining order
And put her in intensive care.

Right away Mary-Ann flew in from Atlanta
On a red eye midnight flight.
She held Wandas hand as they worked out a plan
And it didn't take em long to decide,

That Earl had to die.
Goodbye, Earl, those black eyed peas
They tasted alright to me Earl, you're feelin weak
Why don't you lay down and sleep, Earl
Ain't it dark, wrapped up in that tarp, Earl.

To under score the statement being made by the song, a subsequent verse indicates there were no moral concerns about the final resolution:

²⁰Also worth examining for their political message is Shania Twain's (1997a) "Man! I feel Like a Woman," her (1997b) "Honey, I'm Home," and Neko Case's (2002) "Pretty Girls" about a woman in a Planned Parenthood waiting room.

Well, the weeks went by and
Spring turned to summer and summer faded into fall
And it turns out he was a missing person
Who nobody missed at all

Martina McBride's song "Independence Day" (1993) tells the story from the perspective of a child in a home with domestic abuse where the woman involves sets fire to her house with her husband inside.²¹

Well, she lit up the sky that fourth of July
By the time that the firemen come
They just put out the flames
And took down some names
And sent me to the county home.
Now I ain't sayin' it's right or it's wrong
But maybe it's the only way.
Talk about your revolution
It's Independence Day.

Let freedom ring, let the white dove sing
Let the whole world know that today
Is a day of reckoning.
Let the weak be strong, let the right be wrong
Roll the stone away, let the guilty pay
It's Independence Day.²²

The music for the chorus evokes the type of celebration that one associates with patriotic songs, thus equating national independence with the independence of an abused women (note also the Biblical imagery).²³

²¹It is actually unclear from the song whether the woman was also in the house given that the child becomes a ward of the county.

²²See also Martina McBride (1997) "A Broken Wing."

²³Independence Day was used by the Sarah Palin campaign in 2008. The juxtaposition of Palin's political views with the content of the song led songwriter Gretchen Peters to donate her royalties to Planned Parenthood.

Miranda Lambert (2007), with numerous feminist songs (see “Kerosene” 2005; “White Liar” 2009a; “Fastest Girl in Town” 2011; “Girls” 2014; “Babies Makin’ Babies” 2014), continues the statements on the ramifications of domestic abuse with a song that should more directly appeal to country music fans appreciation of firearms (see also her “Time to Get a Gun” 2009b):

He slapped my face and he shook me like a rag doll
Don’t that sound like a real man
I’m gonna show him what little girls are made of
Gunpowder and lead.

Contrast Lambert with Brandy Clark (2013) in “Stripes” who explains to her cheating spouse that the only thing keeping her from pulling the trigger

Is I hate stripes and orange ain’t my color
And if I squeeze that trigger tonight
I’ll be wearin’ one or the other
There’s no crime of passion worth a crime of fashion
The only thing savin’ your life
Is that I don’t look good in orange and I hate stripes

In short, a cheating partner rates lower on her priorities than a fashion faux pas.²⁴ The songs of the Dixie Chicks, Miranda Lambert and Brandy Clark have antecedents in earlier country music, perhaps as best expressed by Wanda Jackson in 1969 in her response to domestic abuse:

There’s gonna be some changes made when you get in tonight
Cause I’m gonna teach you wrong from right
With my big iron skillet in my hand
Gonna show you how a little woman can whip a great big man
If you live through the fight we’re gonna have when you get home
You’ll wake up and find yourself alone

Less violent personally but striking at male images that could be associated with sexism, Carrie

²⁴This set of songs might be considered a challenge to the Forrester Sisters (1991) “Men”: “You can’t live with ‘em, and you just can’t shoot ‘em. Men.”

Underwood (2005) deals with cheating another way²⁵:

And he don't know...
That I dug my key into the side
Of his pretty little souped-up four-wheel drive,
Carved my name into his leather seats...
I took a Louisville slugger to both headlights,
Slashed a hole in all four tires...
Maybe next time he'll think before he cheats.

Deana Carter (1996), in contrast, skips the violence and property damage and relies on sarcasm instead:

Flowers and wine
is what I thought I would find,
when I came home from working tonight.
Well, now here I stand
over this fryin' pan,
and you want a cold one again.
...
As I head for the door,
I turn around to be sure,
did I shave my legs for this?

Race and Ethnicity

Race is rarely discussed in country music that gets radio play (e.g. see David Allan Coe's "Nothing Sacred" album and his "Underground Album"), rather the segregated ambience generally speaks for itself.²⁶ Although there have been fringe elements of country music that are overtly racist and proud of it (see Messner, et al. 2007), for the most part such work receives no air play. More subtle signals such as the use of the Confederate battle flag are more frequent and

²⁵In contrast see Underwood's (2012) "Two Black Cadillacs" which has the wronged wife and the other woman combine to eliminate the cheater. In a rare case of a male singer, taking a similar position see Garth Brooks (1991) cover of "Thunder Rolls," a Tanya Tucker song.

²⁶There has actually been a small presence of African American artists in country music that date back to its origins. See the excellent set of studies in Pecknold (2013).

often highly visible at concerts and in official materials.²⁷ As a result, Marty Robbins (1966) song, “Ain’t I Right,” about the civil rights freedom riders²⁸ is fairly unusual:

You came down to this southern town last summer
To show the folks a brand new way of life
But all you’ve shown the folks around here is trouble
And you’ve only added misery to their strife
Your concern is not to help the people
And I’ll say again, though it’s been often said
Your concern is just to bring discomfort, my friend
And your policy is just a little red.

A frequent conservative association of this time was the contention that the civil rights’ movement was populated by communists who were seeking to stir up trouble in basically happy communities. A prominent example of the time was FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s smear campaign against Martin Luther King, Jr. (see Garrow 2015). According to Robbins, what is the solution to the unrest caused by the civil rights movement?:

Let’s look and find the strong and able leaders
It’s time we found just how our neighbors’ stand
If we’re to win this war with Communism
Let’s fight it here as well as Vietnam
Let’s rise as one and meet our obligations
So Communistic boots will never trod
Across the fields of freedom that were given to us
With the blessing of our great almighty God

Note the wide range of symbols to disparage the civil rights workers – communism, the war in

²⁷Country group Alabama has used the Confederate flag on album covers and singles; David Allen Coe’s facebook page openly displays the flag and a photo of Coe playing a guitar with the flag on it (<https://www.facebook.com/DACoutlaw/> accessed April 23, 2016). Songs by Hank Williams, Jr. (“The South’s Gonna Rattle Again” 1982) and Blake Shelton (“Kiss My Country Ass” 2010) make positive references to the flag.

²⁸The freedom riders were civil rights workers (generally college students) who traveled to southern states to register voters in the 1960s.

Vietnam, and God as a way to call for authoritarian leaders. A notable contrast with Robbins is Kristofferson (1970) and his view of both authority and by implication “strong and able leaders” in “The Law is for Protection of the People”:

Homer Lee Hunnicut was nothing but a hippy
Walking thru this world without a care
Then one day, six strapping brave policeman
Held down Homer Lee and cut his hair

‘Cause the law is for protection of the people
Rules are rules and any fool can see
We don’t need no hairy headed hippies
Scarin’ decent folks like you and me, no siree.

More striking is the religious appeals of Robbins versus that of Kristofferson. Robbins makes an appeal to authority, Kristofferson more directly links to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth:

So thank your lucky stars you’ve got protection
Walk the line, and never mind the cost
And don’t wonder who them lawmen was protecting
When they nailed the savior to the cross.

‘Cause the law is for protection of the people
Rules are rules and any fool can see
We don’t need no riddle speaking prophets
Scarin’ decent folks like you and me, no siree.

Kristofferson (1970b) generally combines race with class in his opposition to authority and the arbitrary implementation of laws. In “Best of All Possible Worlds” he writes:

I was runnin’ thru the summer rain, try’n’ to catch that evenin’ train
And kill the old familiar pain weavin’ thru my tangled brain
When I tipped my bottle back and smacked into a cop I didn’t see
That police man said, "Mister Cool, if you ain’t drunk, then you’re a fool."
I said, "If that’s against the law, then tell me why I never saw
A man locked in that jail of yours who wasn’t neither black or poor as me?"

Alternative country artist Kinky Friedman is more known for political incorrectness and his

outlandish sense of humor than social commentary with such songs as “The Ballad of Charles Whitman” (1973), “They Ain’t Making Jews Like Jesus Anymore” (1974), and “Get Your Biscuits in the Oven and Your Buns in Bed” (1973) than for commentary on race.²⁹ “Ride ‘em Jewboy” (1973c) is his commentary on the Holocaust:

Ride, ride ‘em Jewboy
Ride em all around the old corral.
I’m, I’m with you boy
If I’ve got to ride six million miles.
Now the smokes from camps are rising
See the helpless creatures on their way.
Hey, old pal, ain’t it surprising
How far you can go before you stay.
Don’t you let the morning blind ya
When on your sleeve you wore the yeller star.
Old memories still live behind ya,
Can’t you see by your outfit who you are.

So ride, ride em jewboy,
Ride em all around the old corral.
I’m, I’m with you boy
If I’ve got to ride six million miles.

The common interests of the poor and black at times get attention to popular country music.

Tanya Tucker’s “I Believe the South is Gonna Rise Again” (1974) portrays a new South based on these common interests:

Our neighbors in the big house called us redneck
‘Cause we lived in a poor share croppers shack
The Jackson’s down the road were poor like we were
But our skin was white and there’s was black.
But I believe the South is gonna rise again
But not the way we thought it would back then
I mean everybody hand in hand

²⁹To be fair to Friedman, “They Ain’t Making Jews Like Jesus Anymore” is about Kinky beating up a white, “ethnocentric racist” and was written shortly after the Six day Arab-Israeli War in 1967.

I believe the South is gonna rise again.³⁰

Johnny Cash built an entire performing persona around identifying with the oppressed regardless of race.³¹ In his classic “Man In Black” he (1971) explains:

Well, you wonder why I always dress in black,
Why you never see bright colors on my back, . . .
I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down,
Livin’ in the hopeless, hungry side of town,
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime,
But is there because he’s a victim of the times.
I wear the black for those who never read,
Or listened to the words that Jesus said,
About the road to happiness through love and charity,
Why, you’d think He’s talking straight to you and me.

One of the most unexpected country songs involving race is Merle Haggard’s, “Irma Jackson” (1972) that involves an inter-racial love affair:

I’d love to shout my feelin’s from a mountain high
And tell the world I love her and I will till I die
There’s no way the world will understand that love is color blind
That’s why Irma Jackson can’t be mine

The timing of Irma Jackson places it between Haggard’s late 1960s condemnation of hippies and anti-war protesters and his later cynicism of Republican policies in “Rainbow Stew” and “Are the Good Times Really Over.” Perhaps this reflects a transition in his thinking or perhaps the late 1960s work might be considered a deviation from his songs about the common people (see

³⁰This song was written by David Allan Coe. See Also Elvis Presley, “If I Can Dream” (1968) recorded soon after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. that contains direct references to King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Kenny Rogers (1969) “Reuben James” tells the story of a white child raised by a black man.

³¹In 1964 Cash released his album Bitter Tears, a series of songs about the plight of Native Americans in the United States. The album contains the hit song “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” and also a highly political track titled “Custer.”

“Mamma Tried” 1968; “Hungry Eyes” 1969b).

The Common Man: Poor and Proud

Few themes in country music are as prominent as the good qualities of the common man (or little man) who suffers nobly and continues to contribute to society. Such songs often link to American values, patriotism, and pride even if leavened with a touch of cynicism. An excellent example is David Allen Coe’s (1977) “If That Ain’t Country”:

The old man was covered with tattoos and scars.
He got some in prison and others in bars,
The rest he got working’ on old junk cars
In the daytime.
They looked like tombstones in our yard
And I never seen him when he wasn’t tired and mean.
...
And the neighbors said we lived like hicks
But they brung their cars for pa to fix anyhow.
He was veteran-proud, tried and true
He’d fought till his heart was black and blue
Didn’t know how he’d made it through the hard times
He bought our house on the GI bill
But it wasn’t worth all he had to kill to get it

I’ve seen the grand ole opry,
And I’ve met Johnny Cash
If that ain’t country, I’ll kiss your ass

The struggles of the common man are frequently blamed on big business or big government.

Willie Nelson sponsored several benefit concerts (FarmAid) to aid struggling farmers faced with possible foreclosures. In Heartland, Nelson (1993) sings:

There’s a home place under fire
Tonight in the heartland
And the bankers are taking my home
And my land from me

There’s a big achin’ hole in my chest

Now, where my heart was
And a hole in the sky
Where God used to be

These are not just rural concerns. They are concerns with working people faced with dire economic circumstances; John Rich (2009) in “Shuttin’ Detroit Down” ties the problems of common man to the greed of big business in reference to the bailouts of the Great Recession:

My daddy taught me in this country everyone’s the same
You work hard for your dollar and you never pass the blame
When it don’t go your way
Now I see all these big shots whining on my evening news
About how they’re losing billions and it’s up to me and you
To come running to the rescue
Well, pardon me if I don’t shed a tear
They’re selling make believe and we don’t buy that here

Because in the real world they’re shuttin Detroit down
While the boss man takes his bonus paid jets on out of town
DC’s bailing out them bankers as the farmers auction ground
Yeah, while they’re living up on Wall Street in that New York City town
Here in the real world they’re shuttin Detroit down.³²

In a wider ranging critique of contemporary problems and the inability of government to solve them, “We Can’t Make it Here” by James McMurtry (2005) ranges from returning veterans to the loss of jobs to the problem of teen pregnancy.³³

Vietnam Vet with a cardboard sign
Sitting there by the left turn line
Flag on the wheelchair flapping in the breeze
One leg missing, both hands free
No one’s paying much mind to him

³²“Shuttin’ Detroit Down” seems a long way from Rich’s duet “Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy),” Big and Rich 2004.

³³Perhaps the most ranging country protest song is Iris DeMent (1996) “Living in the Wasteland of the Free.” On feminism and family issues also see DeMent (2004) “God May Forgive You (But I Won’t).

The V.A. budget's stretched so thin
And there's more comin' home from the Mideast war
We can't make it here anymore
That big ol' building was the textile mill
It fed our kids and it paid our bills
But they turned us out and they closed the doors
We can't make it here anymore

High school girl with a bourgeois dream
Just like the pictures in the magazine
She found on the floor of the laundromat
A woman with kids can forget all that
If she comes up pregnant what'll she do
Forget the career, forget about school
Can she live on faith? live on hope?
High on Jesus or hooked on dope
When it's way too late to just say no³⁴
You can't make it here anymore

In a wide ranging song touching multiple themes involving the common man Alan Jackson

(1998) the "Little Man" touches nostalgia, the evils of big business, race and God:

I remember walkin' round the court square sidewalk
Lookin' in windows at things I couldn't want
There's Johnson's hardware and Morgan's jewelry
And the ol' Lee King's apothecary
They were the little man
The little man

I go back now and the stores are empty
Except for an old coke sign dated 1950
Boarded up like they never existed
Or renovated and called historic districts
There goes the little man
There goes the little man

Now the court square's just a set of streets
That the people go round but they seldom think

³⁴“Just say no” was Nancy Reagan’s touch phrase and becomes part of the federal policies on sex education that required the teaching of abstinence only. On the failure of abstinence only sex education see Santelli et al. (2006) and Kirby (2008).

Bout the little man that built this town
Before the big money shut em down
And killed the little man
Oh the little man

It wasn't long ago when I was a child
An old black man came with his mule and his plow
He broke the ground where we grew our garden
Back before we'd all forgotten
about the little man
The little man
Long live the little man
God bless the little man

Making a stronger tie to ethnicity and contemporary political issues, Tom Russell (2006) "Who's Gonna Build Your Wall" contrasts the rhetoric of politics to the harm caused to the common people and suggests that the real problem are certain business interests:

I got 800 miles of bolted border
Right outside my door
There's minutemen in little pickup trucks
Who declared their own dang war
Now the government wants to build a barrier like ol' Berlin, 8 feet tall

But if Uncle Sam sends the illegals home
Who's gonna build the wall

Who's gonna build your wall, boys
Who's gonna mow your lawn
Who's gonna cook your Mexican food
When your Mexican maid is gone

I ain't got no politics
So don't lay that rap on me
Left wing right wing up wing down
I see strip malls

We've got fundamentalist Muslims
We've got fundamentalist Jew
We've got fundamentalist Christian
That'll blow the whole thing up for you

But as I travel around this big ol' world
There's one thing that I most fear
It's a white man in a golf shirt
With a cell phone in his ear

Who's gonna build your wall, boys

Conclusion

The politics of country music involves the communication of signals that express what the genre sees as acceptable American values. This politics of identity seeks to define behavior that is sanctioned and rule out behavior that is inappropriate or even deviant. The creation of acceptable values should not be viewed monolithic or as a centrally directed, overarching consistent ideological effort. Similar to the political thinking of ordinary Americans (Lane 1962), the expressions of country music artists are sporadic and frequently inconsistent. Any comprehensive survey of someone such as Merle Haggard would find his advocacy for the poor (Hungry Eyes) next to his endorsement of inter-racial relationships (Irma Jackson) juxtaposed with his denunciations of hippies and dissenters (Okie from Muskogee and Fightin' Side of Me) and overlaid with his criticism of conservative politicians (Are the Good Times Really Over for Good). These constitute a wide range of political views linked perhaps only because they are all political.

Yet, collectively country music has engendered a redistributive politics of values with six key themes. The themes are interwoven and frequently presented in combination rather than as stand alone ideas. Detailing these themes, as a result, is difficult in a strictly ordered essay but rather needs to retain some of the chaotic nature of country music itself. These are not generally sophisticated statements of political ideology; that is hardly possible in a three minute song that

seeks to communicate to the working class (and also sell some records).

First, country music elevates the common man, the person who works hard, struggles to feed his or her family, faces difficult situations, and retains one's pride and faith in God. The songs of Alan Jackson, Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash, and Willie Nelson fit centrally within this theme, but so too does much of country music. Second, family values are paramount but the traditional family values of country music have clear gender roles and biases. The tension between the family values concept and the non-political themes of drinking and cheating has led to a subgenre of feminist oriented work that dates from early times (the Carter Family) to the 1960s feminist movements (Wanda Jackson, Loretta Lynn) to contemporary times (Miranda Lambert, Martina McBride, Maddie and Tae, etc.). Third, patriotism is presented as a core American value in country music, often in the love it or leave it terms of Haggard but also in the work of Lee Greenwood, Toby Keith and others. The patriotism theme, however, runs into the common man theme as one stream of music asks why the common people pay the highest price for patriotism (Kris Kristofferson, David Allen Coe). Fourth, because country music is an overwhelmingly white genre, race and ethnicity plays little role in mainstream country music. The tension between the idolization of the common man and the status of racial minorities in the United States has generated a small, but significant statements about race (Kris Kristofferson, Tom Russell, Merle Haggard, Alan Jackson). Fifth, religion and belief in God are frequently interwoven with the other themes of country music. The evils of bigness, however, are applied to religion as well as business and politics with criticism of commercial religion (Hank Williams, Jr.) and ties to a simpler more personal religion and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth (Kristofferson). Sixth, country music is nostalgic, longing for the good old days. Of these six

values, only the common man and nostalgia remain unchallenged by counter efforts in country music.³⁵ At some point, perhaps some country artist will return to verse six of “This Land is My Land” and point out that the good old days were often not very good to the common man.

³⁵An exception is Dolly Parton’s (1969) release “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad):” “No amount of money could pay me To go back and live through it again, In the good old days when times were bad.”

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